

Written on APRIL 21, 2015 AT 6:15 AM by SVANDERWERFF

Overeating and Stress

Filed under FAMILIES, FLEET AND THE FLEET MARINE FORCE, FORCE HEALTH AND SAFETY [NO COMMENTS]



Cravings can be triggered by an emotion such as anger, frustration, anxiety, sadness, and most often, stress.

By Cmdr. Jean Fisak, deputy director, Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control Public Affairs

Stress reduction is extremely important when it comes to controlling your weight. Along with regular physical readiness tests and a daily exercise regimen, Sailors and Marines must incorporate a healthy diet into their busy lifestyles, and take a look at what they eat and why.

There is a difference between hunger and cravings. True hunger grows gradually in intensity and results in a rumbling stomach or lower energy levels. Cravings are sudden and geared toward a particular food or drink. Hunger will intensify over time while cravings can subside. Hunger is the body’s way of letting you know it needs fuel.

Cravings can be triggered by an emotion such as anger, frustration, anxiety, sadness, and most often, stress. Service members experience multiple daily stressors in their work and home lives. These stressors have the potential to lead to negative behaviors like overeating and stress eating.

Stress is the number one reason for overeating. When we are feeling stressed, our bodies release the stress hormone cortisol, which makes us crave carbohydrates, sugar, and fatty foods. These foods soothe the body due to the chemical changes they create. This soothing impact is only temporary, though, and once the short-term “high” wears off it is replaced by a long period of fatigue. In the long term, and when consumed in excess, these rich foods can have an adverse effect on every major system of the body. Often, people tend to overindulge thanks to the “feel good” neurotransmitters and chemicals produced by these “comfort

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foods”.

In addition to overeating, people who are frequently exposed to stressful situations, such as service members or caregivers, often struggle to fit a balanced nutritional diet into their busy schedule. Stress can also cause people to skip or forget to eat meals. People under stress also tend to consume more coffee or other stimulants, which if taken in large quantities, can have adverse effects on the body, resulting in excess stored fat, inconsistencies in blood sugar, tiredness, lapses of concentration, and mood swings.

If you find yourself overeating or “stress eating”, here are tips to help you overcome it.

- 1. Be mindful – Try to be aware of the size of your portions and how many bites you have taken. Place your fork on your plate after each bite, and fully chew each bite you take. Stop when you feel truly full. Don’t try to clear off the plate just to clear off the plate.

Drink water – Cravings and hunger pangs can sometimes mask dehydration. People drink beverages such as coffee, tea, and soda as a means of getting more energy. However,

- 1. these types of drinks act as a diuretic this promoting dehydration. Water will rehydrate you and flush out toxins. If you’re feeling hungry or have a craving, try drinking some water.
- 2. Deep breathing – When you take deep breaths, you’re letting more oxygen in. This is a great stress reliever as it allows you to think more clearly and make better decisions about your diet.

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